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ABSTRACT

Two essential concepts are developed in this paper: (1) the first year of language instruction is a period in which the student should gain basic command of the target language verbally and develop reading skills as well, and (2) the "comfort level" in reading should be retained as the student progresses. The latter, the author suggests, assures that the student will not simply decipher the text. Care is urged in the selection of instructional materials. (RL)

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LET'S TEACH READING

The teaching of reading in a foreign language has always been a problem. In the days before the popularity of the audio-lingual concept of teaching language, reading was the major goal. Even then, reading was largely translation of the foreign materials to the native language and but a few of the students ever attained great proficiency. Much subtle meaning went unrecognized because the reader had no way of interpreting shades of meaning which the speaker of a language learns to understand intutively from the printed page.

Since interest has shifted to verbal learning, some text books have appeared which include no materials at all expressly designed for developing reading skills. Many teachers have become so involved with the verbal phase of learning that they feel there is no time to develop skills in other areas. The result is that, in too many instances, practically no attention is being given to the teaching of reading.

It is quite incredible that, in the dozens of books which are now available on language learning, so little attention has been directed toward the question of what is involved in the process of learning to read a second language. What background is useful to the student in learning to read another language? What skills of oral language contribute to the act of reading? What techniques are conductive to the development of reading skills? It must be recognized, of course, that a simple article on reading cannot provide all the answers to these and the many related questions which must arise, but certainly some insight can be gained from a serious consideration of the problem.

First, it must be made clear that reading in a second language, just as it is in the native language, is the skill of understanding from the written symbols what the learner would understand through verbal exchange. True reading in a foreign language, then, is not deciphering and transfer into the native language but rather the ability to gather meaning directly from the printed page. The degree of comfort the learner feels in this kind of reading is a measure of his competence.

There are stages of development in learning to read in this way which cannot be ignored if success and steady progress are to be achieved. There are also important proficiencies to be developed in each stage, most of which once begun, are on-going toward even greater proficiency. These stages include at least three and are not necessarily parallel to the commonly designated levels of learning in first, second, third years, etc. They are: a pre-reading period; a controlled period of building proficiency; and the final, free reading period which may be called advanced or independent reading.

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The initial period must be termed the pre-reading period. There is some similarity here to the pre-reading period of a small child who enters school for the first time. It is a time when the learner must first become thoroughly acquainted with at least a block of spoken language. This spoken language, which he can understand when he hears it ans which he can reproduce with correct pronunciation himself, becomes a working basis for learning to recognize the same message in written or printed form. Finally he must be able to produce in writing, with correct spelling, anything he can say. This block of material need not be large. In actual practice, the above sequence of activity is applied, most effectively, to each lesson or unit of most of the audio-lingually oriented texts.

Besides learning the verbal language, the student is establishing, little by little in such a way that the task is slight, the "fit" of the sounds he has learned to make with the written symbols. This awareness of "fit" is important in recognizing word boundaries and is, of course, more difficult in some languages than in others; for example, in French, les amis, which sounds like one word, must be recognized by the reader as two words. The activity of reading and writing what he has been saying further helps the student in that it serves as reinforcement to memory and helps to clarify and to retain understanding of structural cues.

The contention that the learner should not be permitted to see the language for months or a year or more because of the element of interference of his native language is a totally untenable notion. American students are visual-minded by the time they reach the fifth or sixth grade. They feel deprived of one of their important tools of learning--that is, seeing, as in fact they are deprived. The only result of long delay must be greater confusion when reading is finally begun, to say nothing of the boredom which comes with constant oral drill. This does not mean that initial learning or encounter of new material should not be verbal. The learner must be able to produce messages verbally, but this is done quickly and definitively; then he sees.

Once the learner has become able to read and to write anything he has memorized, he must be asked to read material made up of the same vocabulary and structures but in rearranged form so that the "story" reads differently. This is a form of expansion and, as more lessons are completed, provides quite a repertoire for reading, for writing answers to questions after reading, or for writing paragraphs. Equally important, he is actually experiencing the workings of language.

In this kind of procedure, the learner is perfectly comfortable in his reading. This is extremely important because the "comfort" one experiences in reading is an index of one's proficiency in reading. Comfort, thus used, is an indication of the reader's understanding of what he reads, understanding which should be immediate and effortless.

It is obvious that this pre-reading period must continue until the most common, most normally used structures of any particular language are known and controlled by the students. In the high school, this point may well be reached mid-way in the second year, though various factors may hasten or delay reaching this point.

The second stage in the development of reading skill involves reading material which has never, to any degree, been memorized. Obviously, it must employ the same structures learned in the pre-reading period, as well as much of the vocabulary. The chief goal, now, is the expansion and development of vocabulary while maintaining the comfort level in reading. This is a stage which is most difficult to teach and places much responsibility on the teacher, who must see that students learn the techniques of reading new material with comprehension.

The manner of presentation of the new material to be read is very important. An oral discussion, in the foreign language of course, can present new vocabulary. Visual aids, be they stick people, simple pictures, the actual articles, slides, or whatever, are invaluable in the oral presentation of vocabulary before reading is begun.

Though there are many helps and techniques which the teacher may employ, some of which will be mentioned later, the approach to the new reading selection in which

new vocabulary is to appear is tremendously important for the simple reason that the confidence of the reader must be preserved. No material containing new vocabulary should ever be handed to the student to read alone until he is an experienced reader. Each new selection should be begun aloud in class. After each sentence or each portion or paragraph, depending upon the difficulty, the teacher asks key questions which help clarify either the vocabulary or the action taking place. Reading aloud should continue until such a time as the students seem to be comprehending easily, or when they themselves insist upon reading ahead.

This practice of starting any new selections aloud, with the individuals of the class taking turns at reading, and with the teacher and students asking questions, pays off unbelievably as a time saver and a way to avoid confusion as the year progresses. The teacher is able to know precisely what the students comprehend, which students have difficulty, and what the stumbling blocks are. Explanations and drills can be provided to ease the problems before they become great. Most important of all, the student's confidence in himself is never shaken and his interest and enjoyment are increased. This practice of beginning each selection together should be continued through all levels. One realizes, however, that the more experienced the reader becomes, the shorter the period of orientation will be, until it has diminished to a mere introduction.

Attention now turns to the question of other specific aids in the development of vocabulary and reading skill. Exercises in catching meaning from context alert students to watch for cues to meaning. In this respect, they are now aided by the habits they have developed through pattern drills and slot placements in the pre-reading stage. Intuitively they may be aware of the function of new words, thus having clues to what they might be. Using English as an example, the sentence, "The scribe picked up his pen and began to write," shows how context can help in understanding what a scribe might be, since pen and write give clues. A related kind of problem is the firgurative use of words which the reader may know in another context; for example, the difference in meaning of "a dry river" and "a dry person". Even the realization that this kind of thing happens in the native language and can happen in many kinds of examples in the new language is progress for the reader.

It is important, also, to call attention, through carefully designed exercises, to any structural cues or uses unusual to the speaker of English but common to the particular language being learned. In some languages, for example, a variation in word order may be common. The sentence "Mary was crying when John arrived" normally appears in Spanish with the subject of the dependent clause in reverse order, "María lloraba cuando llegó Juan." Sometimes a structural cue may indicate word function as occurs in the Spanish sentence, "El coche lo compró Juan ayer." The lo is redundant but serves to indicate that the object of the verb is coche though it appears in the normal subject slot. These are, of course, only examples of the kind of uses which should be completely understood and used as a matter of course, as the reader progresses.

Drills for expanding vocabulary can be developed by the teacher. Needless to say, a drill is only a drill and must, if it is to further progress, be followed by actual usage of the points in question. Some suggestions for exercises, some of which will be recognized as simple, others as more advanced, include: (examples appear in English to make possible their application to several languages)

1. the game of opposites: white -- black
   inside -- outside
   asleep -- awake etc.

2. subject matter words: animals -- dog, cat, bear, fox, etc.
   vehicles -- car, automobile, truck, jeep, etc.

3. words with multiple meanings: run, bank, crop, etc.

4. words lexically related but having different functions: to marry, marriage, marriageable

5. replacement of indicated function words: The strange man walked down the street. ran, stumbled, ambled, etc.

6. planned excursion: an excursion during which new terminology will be met, such as a trip to a factory, a walk in the woods, a visit to a farm, etc.

7. onomotopoeic words: murmur, whisper, hiss, growl, etc.

8. slang uses and misuses

It seems somewhat artificial to further divide student progress beyond a third stage for the simple reason that all of the kinds of learning which have been taking place in stage two are on-going and expanding. The teacher who is intuitive and aware of the individuals in the classes will maintain steady progress forward from any given point. Thus progress depends upon the innate abilities found within the class itself and upon the awareness of the teacher in furthering their learning progress. Stage three, however, is the stage when the students will be sufficiently experienced and independent that they may read what interests them (within reasonable limits), and they may follow such reading with reports, oral or written, participation in panel discussions, presenting a lecture on a special interest, etc. In other words, in stage three the reader becomes emancipated and free in his reading.

Other factors to be considered in the development of reading skills may be pointed out.

1. Students can be expected to read for facts before they can read for ideas. Facts are expressed on the printed page. Ideas are less obvious and therefore less recognizable. Both abilities must be developed as the reader progresses, and suitable materials must be provided for reading and discussion.

2. Factual material is easier to read than imaginative material, another important factor in selecting reading materials at any given level of experience.

3. Contemporary material is easier to read than that of a century or more ago. It is a mistake to attempt literature in its chronological order. Rather, it is wise to begin with contemporary works and move backward.

4. For the younger reader, materials of peer interest are highly suitable.

5. Longer selections, contrary to the notions of many people, are better for readers of little experience because during a longer selection, there is time to develop a "universe of discourse", and to become familiar with the style and ideas of an author, etc.

6. After students have experience in reading through class activities, they will begin to read on their own. At this stage, any material placed in the reader's hands for his own reading experience must be chosen at a level of much less difficulty than that which he experienced in class activity. Thus, the comfort level is maintained and the student develops speed in reading.

The two essential concepts which have been developed here are: 1. that the first year and somewhat more is only a pre-reading period in which the student gains basic command of the language not only verbally, but in written form as well; and 2. that the comfort level in reading must be retained as the reader progresses. The latter is insurance against falling back into deciphering. Materials to be used must be carefully selected and teaching procedures adapted to permit the learner to progress with a minimum of confusion and at his maximum rate.

The great problem with the teaching of reading has been, too frequently, that students have not really been taught to read in the foreign language. Since in a second language, students already are familiar with the techniques of reading, it has been assumed that they can transfer techniques to another language. They have simply been handed something to read and told to read. We have spent time preparing word lists and judging materials accordingly, but we have not always spent time with the students, helping them adjust to the new language and its cues to understandi ng. Reading is much too important an accomplishment to receive the slip-shod kind of attention we often give it. After all, the ability to read is not just a goal in foreign language learning; it is a source of information and great personal enjoyment to the individual.

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